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THE
ADDRESS
OF
THE BRITISH CONVENTION,
ASSEMBLED AT EDINBURGH,
NOVEMBER 19, 1793,
TO THE
PEOPLE OF GREAT BRITAIN.

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THE NATIONAL CONVENTION

OF THE PEOPLE OF THE UNITED STATES

IN CONGRESS ASSEMBLED

DO PASS AN ACT

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AN ACT

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REPEAL THE ACT ENTITLED

ADDRESS, &c.

WE, THE DELEGATES OF THE BRITISH CONVENTION, stating the claims, feeling the interests, and expressing the will of thousands of our fellow Citizens, address you at this awful and momentous crisis, in the cause of our Country, in the cause of Freedom, and of suffering Humanity.

As Members of the same Government, deriving the same Rights under the same Title, we claim your patient hearing, and dispassionate decision. We know and we respect the tribunal to which we appeal, and therefore have every thing to hope and nothing to fear from the judgment which you shall pass. That tribunal composed of the understanding and disinterested men of this great Nation, will pronounce without flattery and without fear, the decree of Justice to the present age and to posterity;

and we, therefore, look forward with an honest confidence to the approbation of Mankind, who, from the purity of our conduct, will ultimately decide upon the rectitude of our intentions, and the sincerity of our hearts.

The nineteenth day of November, the day on which the British Convention first met at Edinburgh, will form a pleasing and memorable epoch, not only in the History of our Country, but in the History of the Human Mind. Those hands, which the common Father of us all had formed to be united in the bonds of Friendship and of Peace, but which the wicked policy of Governments had too often bathed in innocent blood, were now extended to raise our drooping Country, and to clasp each other in the embraces of a brotherly affection. Nor was the object of our Convention more praiseworthy, than the principle was legitimate.

Respecting even the prejudices of the good, earnestly wishing to promote the welfare, without disturbing the peace of our Country, and anxious to guard against the imputation of *novelty*; among the records of former times, and in the established usages of our ancestors, we sought for precedent, and we found it. In the institutions of ALFRED, that Patriot King, who approached as nearly to Perfection as Human Nature will permit, we discovered the guide and sanction of our conduct.— In those golden days, as they have been emphatically called, the annual meeting of all *free men*, was an acknowledged part of our venerable Constitution.

Among

Among them was placed the King himself as the common Father of a Family, whose duty it was to hear their wrongs, and to redress them; to appease their murmurs by executing the office of a vigilant magistrate, and to court the affections of his People as the most solid support of his Throne. From this judicious organization of the whole country, a common sympathy was excited; a quick sensibility to their mutual sufferings was diffused, and the hand of Justice was as readily stretched out to chastise guilt, and protect innocence, as the tongue of the oppressed was eager to claim it.

Their meetings were not clouded by tumultuous disputation, nor in them are to be found any traces of folly or caprice. Violations of law were rare, because all felt a pride to obey, and an interest to preserve, what the understandings of all had conceived, and the will of all had combined to enact.

THIS CONSTITUTION which the wisdom of our Ancestors erected on the deep and broad foundation of a primitive integrity, and which, even in these days, ambitious and designing men have held up, not as the object of a rational admiration, but as the image of a blind and idolatrous worship, has long been mouldering to decay, and is now tottering to its fall. Whilst this Constitution stood, it diffused around it the blessings of freedom, and produced a state of happiness and security which the condition of Human Nature seems scarcely capable of exceeding. But a dark cloud soon over-

shadowed this fair portion of the globe. The daring hand of a Norman Robber, defaced the beautiful edifice which had given equal shelter to the Peasant and the Prince. On the invasion of the first William, the Tree of Feudality was planted in our Island; the bitter fruits of which we are tasting at this day; and his descendants through a succession of years, continued to crush its miserable inhabitants under the weight of their iron sceptre.

The voracious claims of the Crown, supported by armed bands of Foreigners, had nearly swallowed up the Rights of the People, who had now become as dust in the balance, and whose interests were never promoted, nor their will consulted, except when they were called on to join the standard of Despotism, and to shed their blood in the prosecution of Wars, which the destructive ambition of their Kings had excited. The human mind, neglected, uncultivated, and depressed, sunk into a state of profound ignorance and abject slavery.— But this state endured not long—nor is it consistent with the condition of our being that it should.— The love of Freedom is as inseparable from our Nature, as the life-blood which flows from the heart. It is that imperishable spark in the bosom of Man, which Time may smother, but which Eternity cannot extinguish.

The spell was soon broken. In the reign of JOHN, a Meeting, or CONVENTION OF THE BARONS, SUPPORTED BY THE PEOPLE, assembled on the plains of RUNNYMEDE, and demanded and obtained

obtained THE GREAT CHARTER of our Liberties. This Charter was not a renovation, but a partial revival of the violated Rights of our Ancestors.—The People, indeed, still groaned under enormous oppressions; nor did they regain those privileges, or that *political power*, which the generous code of Alfred had conferred. But the People, in all ages, have been more patient to endure, than prone to act, and Governments have rarely lost the obedience of the subject, until they have ceased to deserve it.

For many years, the History of England presents only a dark and confused picture of fierce disputants; of Princes asserting their dubious claim to the Crown; seeking the support, and extending or abridging the Liberties of the People, as it suited the views of their personal ambition; and to whom, as in latter days, the ancient Constitution of these Realms, was but as a musty record, except only, upon such occasions, when the *name* was to be brought forward as a bait for popularity. Over these scenes, for the credit of our Country, and even of our Nature, let Reason and Humanity combine to throw a Pall, since the men who should govern, not the manner of the government, were the objects of contention; whilst the scaffold and the field alternately reddened with the blood of the People, who are the only lawful fountain, as well as the only solid support of political institutions.

Soon after the accession of the House of STUART (a period grateful to the hearts of Britons, as

it was distinguished by the happy union of our Countries!) when Civil Liberty was assailed by the claims of *Prerogative*, and when the sacred Rights of Conscience, which God gave, and which Man cannot surrender, were oppressed by the persecutions of an insolent *Hierarchy*, a Meeting, or CONVENTION OF THE PEOPLE OF ENGLAND, SCOTLAND AND IRELAND, uniting in a firm and patriot Phalanx, rallied round the altars of Freedom and Religion, which they resolved to preserve, or to be buried under their ruins. At that memorable æra, the Union of the People saved the Liberties of our Country. Now, when *Corruption* is sapping the foundations of public Security, let the same union, and the same spirit, enable us to preserve our sacred Inheritance, and whilst we remember the virtues, let us not disgrace the memory of our Ancestors.

Nor were their immediate descendants unworthy of their fires. They imitated the wholesome example which was set them, and when the infatuated JAMES, clad, as he vainly conceived himself to be, in the immunities of Irresponsibility—resting his claims on *Divine Right*, and seeking to convert the maxim that “*Kings can do no wrong*,” into the destruction of that Society, for whose use even Kings were created, the feelings and reason of the People, roused by a sense of self-preservation, broke through the narrow principle of law, because it militated against the higher principle of Eternal Justice.—It was then, fellow citizens, that

THE CONVENTION PARLIAMENT OF ENGLAND, publicly divested him of the authority which he had abused. A new and extraordinary evil, was *then* deemed a sufficient warrant for a new and extraordinary remedy. The Parliament then sitting, was judged incompetent to execute the important task ; and as THE SAFETY OF THE PEOPLE IS THE SOVEREIGN LAW, so it surely was fitting, that the People should have a share, either personally or by deputy, in the making of the law, which, when made, they were bound to obey.— To accomplish this great object, and in order that the CONVENTION PARLIAMENT might be a complete organ of the Public Will ; that it might be an express image of the Feelings of the People, all those who had sitten in Parliament since the restoration of the second CHARLES ; in a word, all who, at any time, having obtained the confidence, might be supposed to express the WILL of the PEOPLE, were summoned to attend.

— Had our forefathers entrenched themselves within the narrow forms, instead of being guided by the liberal spirit of Legislation, the grievances of the People might have died away in useless murmurs, instead of being redressed by that important Revolution, which opened the way for the accession of the HOUSE OF HANOVER. In England much time was consumed in idle disputation, while Scotland, eagerly grasping at the substance of Liberty, and careless about the form in which she might be arrayed, boldly pronounced, that the abuse of trust is itself a revocation of it, and that the King, by invading the Rights, had thereby
forefaulted

forefaulted * the allegiance of the People. At this auspicious period, the Liberties of Britain were, if not more enlarged, at least more firmly secured, and more clearly defined, than they had been during the later ages of Darkness and Despotism.

The spirit of Alfred again arose to animate the Councils of his regenerated country. Scotland, which had long groaned under the domination of an austere and insolent Aristocracy, was called in to share with her Brethren of England, the blessings of Freedom which she had contributed to produce. Placemen and Pensioners were excluded *by Law* from the House of Commons; lest a sense of their dependence on the Crown should, as it must, make them forgetful of their duty to the People. PARLIAMENTS were not to sit for more than three years †, since power long continued is commonly abused; as those who are entrusted with it, are too prone to forget the hand which gave, and the purpose for which it was given.—Ministers were made answerable for the counsels which they afforded, and the Throne, now guarded by the vigilance, and sustained by the love of all its subjects, was no longer a sanctuary for the treachery of its servants.

FRIENDS AND COUNTRYMEN, these wise and wholesome provisions, which were once the boast

* Forfeited.

† Even this was an innovation on our Original Constitution: for by the antient usage, and by two statutes passed in the 4th and 36th years of Edward III. it was declared and enacted, that a Parliament should be holden once a year at least, and more often if need be.

and security of Britons, now form only an object of melancholy remembrance. They are buried in the same sepulchre with the bodies of our ancestors. In many Parliaments which have sitten since the Revolution, Placemen and Pensioners have been so numerous, as to controul the will, while they violated the Rights of the People. Since that time, Parliaments have more than doubled the term of their duration; not by an appeal to the voice of their Electors, small in number and partial in distribution as those are, but by the arbitrary effort of a self-constituted authority. Judging from this specimen, and drawing the natural inference, that what *has* once been done, *may* be done again—We know of no barrier or security at present existing to prevent a future Parliament from enlarging the term of their duration to twenty years; or, if it suits their interest or ambition, from declaring themselves perpetual.

The responsibility of Ministers has become an empty name. Crimes which, during former periods, would have called down upon the heads of their guilty authors, the just vengeance of an injured nation, have been only a passport to opulence and power. The People of Britain have seen the very Ministers who dismembered the empire, squandered a hundred millions of money, and poured out the blood of more than an hundred thousand of their fellow-subjects, in a cruel and desperate contest, again recalled to the confidence of their Sovereign, and loaded with honours and emoluments of the empire.

Thus

Thus you behold, that the spirit of those regulations, which the Revolution produced, is fled—and what remains is only the dead carcase which encumbers the Statute-book. We now ask, Who are those that are guilty of innovation? Is it that band of hirelings to whom corruption is food? or is it we who wish only to restore the principles of our Saxon Ancestors, which gave us Freedom, and that sacred compact which confirmed it at the Revolution? If the foundations of the Throne are shaken, Are they shaken by us, who seek only to replace it on those solid grounds on which it was originally erected?—Or, are they not rather shaken by those, who, with hollow professions of loyalty in their mouths, have sought to establish the authority of the Crown, by the renovation of those practices which banished the Stuarts, and by the violation of those principles which elevated the Brunswicks? We cherish the Constitution of our Ancestors, not as a speculative bauble, but as a practical good; and we contrast with an honest pride, our own sincere admiration of that system, with the fawning treachery of its real foes—of Men, whose praise is profanation, and whose external homage is concealed blasphemy.

THE ONLY OBJECTS OF OUR ASSOCIATION ARE, THE RESTORATION OF ANNUAL PARLIAMENTS AND UNIVERSAL SUFFRAGE. WE GO NO FURTHER. From an authentic statement of facts, which the most hardened audacity cannot deny, we have proved, that our principles are the same with the genuine principles of our Constitution, and are grounded on the established usages of our forefathers.

forefathers. These principles were drawn, and these usages were adopted, from the GREAT CHARTER of Universal Reason, of which the Genius of Freedom was the sacred interpreter. The Rights of Man may be suspended for a time by the outrages of a Tyrant; they may be bound down by the parchment fetters of law, but the Rights of Man are in their nature inextinguishable.

We agree with the enlightened Historian,* that, "The equal distribution of justice, and free enjoyment of property, are the great objects for which political society was, at first, founded among men; which the people have a perpetual and unalienable right to recall; and which no time, nor precedent, nor statute, nor positive institution, ought to deter them from keeping uppermost in their thoughts and attention."

This principle, which we embrace as an object of our understanding, we are authorised to adopt as a rule of our conduct; and as a right without a remedy, is unknown in the code of Reason and of Freedom; so in all cases of oppression, we are justified in applying the redress, whenever we have ascertained the existence of the evil.

FRIENDS AND COUNTRYMEN, our rights have the two-fold sanction of reason and antiquity.—

We have seen that the Temple of British Freedom is a Gothic Fabric, which, reared by the hands, and cemented by the blood of our ancestors, is at

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* Hume's History of England, Vol. III. observation on Magna Charta.

once venerable for age, and respectable for utility. It is a structure which we can claim as an inheritance from our fathers who claimed it themselves from the political Patriarchs in the old time before them. But we know, and we feel, that the Temple of Freedom has yet a broader base, a deeper foundation, and a more remote antiquity. It is a pædium co-eval with time itself, destined for the safeguard of the whole human race, and dropped by the hand of WISDOM from the Firmament of HEAVEN.

We have been asked, What are our Wishes? We answer, LIBERTY, and the means of securing it. But can Liberty be secure, if those who are bound by the Law, have no share in the making of it—No choice of those who can alter, pervert, or annul it? The peace and security of a whole nation are objects far more important than the administration of justice to individuals. The power of all legitimate Government, is a *lodgement*, not a *gift*. We *trust* much, but we *part* with nothing. The freedom of the People can only be safe in the hands of the People. Nor is it sufficient for the People to *be* free;—Governments should be so constituted that they cannot be enslaved. We say, in the words of him who is no more, but whose spirit is immortal, “Not only that Government is “tyrannical which is tyrannically exercised, but “all Governments are tyrannical which have not, “in their Constitution, a sufficient security against the arbitrary power of the Prince †.”

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The means which we employed for the attainment of the end, were as constitutional as the end itself, if obtained, would have been salutary.— Truth was our only object, Reason our only weapon. If the exercise of the reasoning faculties of man, which were given him by the Father of all Goodness, to mend his heart and enlighten his understanding, be cramped or proscribed by the Government of our country, we see not wherein the boasted Constitution of Britain differs from the despotism of Turkey or Algiers. To seek truth, and to spread it, are so essentially connected with our duty both to God and the World, that to deprive us of this invaluable right, under a pretext of reverence for established Government, or from a boasted regard to the peace of society, which all Governments were only established to secure, is both weak and wicked. Weak, because it sacrifices the end to the means; and wicked, because it erects the tyranny of human institutions, on the ruins of the altars of the Deity, and extinguishes that flame by whose DIVINE LIGHT we can alone ascertain their value and their use.

In these our peaceful endeavours, we have been defamed by calumny, menaced by power, and at length assailed by open force. In our Sister Country of IRELAND, the *forms* of *Law* were preserved, though the principles of justice were *violated*. The meetings of the Friends of Parliamentary Reform, the boldest supporters of despotism dared not to interrupt, until an act of the legislature had sanctioned their usurpation. It was the unhallow-

ed voice of a venal Senate, which chaunted the funeral dirge over the rights of three millions of people. That alone was the death bell, which tolled the knell of their departed Freedom.

MEN OF SCOTLAND, whose thinking habits, sober manners, and steady valour, have rendered you an object of reverence among nations, advert to the scene which has of late taken place in the capital of your country. Your own Deputies, together with the Deputies of your Brethren of the South, who came from a far distance with warm hearts, and outstretched arms to embrace you ; who came to mourn over our mutual sufferings, and to endeavour to restore the principles of our violated Constitution—were driven from their peaceful, their salutary, their Constitutional meetings, by the appearance of an armed force, acting under the *semblance* of a legal authority.

But, at this awful crisis, we were not unmindful of the sacred trust which you had reposed in us. Our intentions were pure ; our hearts, therefore, were undaunted. Cultivating the maxims of the Prince of Peace, it was not by us that the kindred-blood of our fellow-men was endangered. *Under these circumstances*, we deemed it our duty to delay the *immediate* prosecution, but, at the same time, resolved to abandon, only with our lives, the object of our association. Clad in the impenetrable armour of Truth, the bayonet and the sword have no terror for us ; and while we reprobate an appeal to any mode of decision, which, though it may slay the body, cannot convince the mind ; we feel

feel a firm and unalterable conviction (as the issue of our Cause is in the hands of the Almighty) that the Liberties of the People will be solidly established, and that Truth and Justice must ultimately triumph.

On all these proceedings, therefore, we look with regret, *but we look without fear*. As armed force cannot appal our hearts, so *persecution under the colour of law*, shall not relax our efforts. If law should be converted into an instrument of oppression, we shall carry with us to our dungeons, a consolation, of which our enemies cannot deprive us, the tears of the compassionate, the approbation of the wise, and the prayers of all good men. And should even death arrest us in our honourable career, we shall enjoy a compensation for the sacrifice which we make——

We shall be entombed in the Hearts of a Grateful People.

FRIENDS AND COUNTRYMEN, having now told you what are *our* principles, and what is *our* object, we call your attention to the principles, the conduct, and the object of those associations, which disturb the peace of our country, under pretence of preserving it. For ourselves we say, We have no interest distinct from yours—we do not servilely feed on the patronage of the great—we prey not on the spoils of an injured country. In *our* conduct we are not influenced by the corrupt hope of obtaining places, nor the slavish fear of

losing them. If such be our sentiments, and such our situation, the Friends of Britain must be our Friends; and we can have no foes, but those who are the foes of Freedom, the foes of our Country, the foes of the Human Race.

We will not degrade the dignity of Reason by enquiring, whether it be not as lawful for us to meet that we may point out the means of *correcting* the abuses of Government, as it is for the pensioned parasites of a Court, and the members of Rotten Corporations to conspire, that they may *preserve* abuses, because they subsist by them.

We look down with contempt upon those silly reflections which ignorance and avarice have combined to throw upon those useful and laborious occupations of life, which, while they contribute to the ease and comfort of the rich, are the solid pillars which support the great fabric of society. Yes, Countrymen, it is our pride and our boast, that this association consists of the honest hands that bring forth the fruits of industry, and not of those useless mouths which consume them. The Peasant and Artificer who earn their bread by the sweat of their brow, are, in the eye of Him, who *is no respecter of persons*, objects of equal regard with the favoured heir of fortune, whose opulence enables him to enjoy, what his diligence had not been exerted to maintain.

We have been scoffingly asked, if the means of *our* information are greater than the means of those whose principles we combat, and whose conduct we arraign? We answer, that we pretend not to
greater

greater, but to equal means of information ; that intellect is the offspring of every soil, and that it is neither confined to, Courts, nor banished from Cottages. We know that it is not in the polluted recesses of luxury and vice, but under the humble roof of Peace and Meditation, that Wisdom, whose habits are simple, delights to abide ; and we are assured, by that sacred authority which none can dispute, that He, who is the Parent of Light, and Fountain of Knowledge, will impart it to all who diligently seek it.

The present situation of the People is awful and alarming to a degree hitherto unparalleled in the annals of Britain. It calls, therefore, for the vigilant attention and active exertions of all who love her. While we are bending under a debt of more than THREE HUNDRED MILLIONS, and which the present system of measures is still further accumulating, our Commerce languishes, our Husbandmen emigrate, and our Manufacturers, through a want of employment, subsist not, as in the Halcyon days of peace, by the honest earnings of their own industry, but on the scanty and precarious bounty of the great.* We are engaged in a War with a powerful and enthusiastic nation ; of which we cannot trace the motive, and of which we shudder to contemplate the end. THE FRIENDS
OF

* Six Thousand Poor Weavers, and their Families, were starving in one parish of London, Spitalfields. Can there be a stronger proof of the rottenness of any system, than that, in a country like England, Six Thousand industrious Men, who are both able and willing to work, should, because they could not procure any, be reduced to the melancholy necessity of starving, or (a circumstance goading to the spirit of Freeman) the still more melancholy necessity of subsisting on the temporary alms of the rich.

OF THE PEOPLE ASK BUT FOR PEACE. If we have errors, ours are the errors of humanity. No Orphan mourns for his slaughtered Sire—No desolate Widow weeps tears of blood over the plans of *our* ambition. But we refrain.——From the wisdom and the virtue of the People of Britain we catch the hope of returning good. The Picture which we have drawn is not overcharged. It is, as you all know, and too many of you feel, not a Fiction of the Imagination, but a Representation of FACTS. We have drawn it with reluctance; but to know our danger, is the first step to avert it; and, at a crisis like the present, to flatter is to betray.

TO THAT BEING, who sees and pierces thro' all disguises, who created the world by his power, who governs it by his wisdom, and who upholds it by his providence, we make this solemn and public appeal for the purity of the motives which actuate our conduct. TRUTH is the only stable foundation of all institutions. As reasoning Beings, we are enabled to discover, and, as moral agents, we are bound to diffuse it. This principle, we know, like every valuable attribute of Man, may be perverted in its practice, and prostituted in its purpose; but we must ever regard the suppression of Meetings of the People (by the interference of power, however elevated) of which the guide, is order, the object, knowledge, and the end, Peace, as establishing principles, and deducing consequences, that must EXTINGUISH FOR EVER THE LIBERTIES OF OUR COUNTRY.

By Order of the British Convention,

W. SKIRVING, SECRETARY.